

Mass Media

Volume-2, Number-21, 2013

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A Communication Research Journal

₹20

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Social Emancipation and Periyar- edited Weekly 'Revolt' (1928-30)

Abhay Kumar*

'Revolt' and Self-Respect Movement :

This paper is a discussion of the views of non-Brahmin thinkers and activists on social emancipation. My focus is mainly on the English weekly 'Revolt' in which they contributed. 'Revolt' was published in English by Self-Respect Movement (SRM) from 1928-1930. It is to be noted that after the introduction of colonial public sphere, certain modes of communication were fixed as legitimate while other forms were treated as unacceptable. For example, if one wanted to get one's voice heard, one should be good at writing petitions, using press for influencing public opinion etc. As a result of this Periyar published 'Revolt' with an aim to reaching out to influential English audiences from a non-Brahmin perspective. V. Geetha and Rajadurai outlined the reason why 'Revolt' was launched. 'Periyar noted that he desired the ideals of the Self-respect movement to be known to people outside Tamil Nadu; he also wanted an English forum to counter the views expressed by Brahmins and the politically selfish class against the Self-respect movement, which found an easy berth in existing English publications (Geetha and Rajadurai: 5).'

Another reason why 'Revolt' came into being was the growing disenchantment of non-Brahmin leaders with the Congress. For example, Periyar who was earlier associated with the Congress-led national movement and was very active during the Non-Cooperation Movement soon became disillusioned with the politics of the

Congress. He realised that the Congress was serving the interest of Brahmins by refusing to take up the issue of social emancipation. After parting ways with the Congress, Periyar got involved in SRM and started editing 'Revolt'.

Unfortunately 'Revolt' had a short life but it carried some of important essays on caste, untouchability, Brahmanism, exploitation of women and superstition etc. The weekly was closed some 80 years back but the kinds of questions it raised are still relevant in our contemporary society.

The weekly carried the articles of the people whom we only know "through their pseudonyms or initials". That is why the views expressed in 'Revolt' cannot for sure be attributed to any particular author. In fact they were voices coming from subaltern public intellectuals who were challenging dominant Brahminical hegemony. In an opposition to the Congress nationalism, SRM believed that true *Swaraj* could only be achieved by doing away with caste, gender, religious discriminations. In other words, mere political freedom is not enough and it should be coupled with social emancipation.

Marx's Idea of Social Emancipation :

Before going through some essays of 'Revolt', I would first briefly discuss Marx's idea of social emancipation. This will help us understand SRM better because there is, in my view, some similarity between Marx's understanding of social emancipation and those of non-Brahmin intellectuals.

Writing in On Jewish Question,

"Young" Marx was in conversation with Bruno Bauer. The relevance of this text is Marx's powerful articulation that human emancipation lay in doing away with inequalities in civil society. Marx's understanding of civil society was that in civil society "egoistic" individuals were pursuing their private interests and this was the sphere where all kinds of inequalities were de-politicised by creating abstract citizens who were equal before the eyes of state at the same time they were unequal in the social realm. Thus, Marx did not have any hesitation to say '...political emancipation is not the final and absolute form of human emancipation... Political emancipation certainly represents a great progress. It is not, indeed, the final form of human emancipation, but it is the final form of human emancipation within the framework of the prevailing social order. It goes without saying that we are speaking here of real, practical emancipation.' (Marx 1978: 32 & 35).

Marx further said that there was a false image created that political emancipation had done away with the issues of religion, private property and other social inequalities. As a matter of fact the modern state, argued Marx, had not annihilated citizen's ascriptive identities. 'Thus, the political drama ends necessarily with the restoration of religion, of private property, of all the elements of civil society, just as war ends with the conclusion of peace (Marx: 1978: 36).'

While discussing Marx-Bauer debate, David Leopold quoted Marx to stress the importance of Civil Society. Leopold, drawing on Marx,

made it clear that there could not emerge a modern state without pushing all kinds of inequalities into the realm of civil society. Similarly, the non-Brahmin thinkers were always concerned with inequalities in the domain of civil society.

As Marx argued that the political freedom had no meaning without social emancipation, the issues of caste, untouchability, widowhood, unequal property relations are crucial for real freedom. As mentioned above, these social issues were not taken up by the dominant nationalism in India, which compelled non-Brahmin thinkers to publish weekly 'Revolt' to present their own perspective.

'Revolt' and Social Emancipation :

Unlike the non-Brahmin intellectuals, Congress leaders like Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Sardar Patel, and Gandhi were against the abolition of *Varnashrama*. Therefore, the pages of 'Revolt' were full of articles in which these leaders were criticised for their defence of caste system. For instance, 'Revolt' attacked Malviya for his views on caste and said that "...if the Panditji by his enthusiastic defence on the platforms defends caste system as it obtains at present, then surely, his is a voice in the wilderness. The demolition of caste is one of the programme in the national renaissance and reconstructions" (Geetha and Rajadurai: 88). Without any ambiguity, 'Revolt' called the caste system a "satanic institution". 'It has been proved beyond doubt that caste system is a satanic institution founded upon a number of slokas just to allow the Brahmin

to exploit mercilessly the dumb millions of the country. One thing is certain, that henceforth it will not be desirous of Malaviya and his caste people to pass their days quite easily with the least bodily exertion and labour, chanting their blessed manthrams, making others at the same time work day in and day out. All these "golden days" have come to a close (Geetha and Rajadurai : 90).'

After calling the caste system a satanic institute, the weekly also explained what sustained it. For non-Brahmin thinkers this is the *Karma* theory of Hinduism that sustains caste system for over centuries and make people fatalist. 'Man is enchained before birth by his past *karma* working through the law of heredity. He leads a fettered existence through life in accordance with the law of *Varnashrama* which is his present *dharma*. (Geetha and Rajadurai: 282)'. Armed with *Karma* theory, the priests had been exploiting masses and thus, SRM cried for a reform: 'It is an urgent reform for our leaders to take up, to sweep the land of these undesirable elements [priests], who live on others' wealth, and to pool all sources of charities towards well-directed channels to clean humanity of its ignorance and poverty...The *Sankaracharis*, *Jeeyars*, *adathipathis*, *Mahants* and the rest of this notorious category have replaced the *Thugs* and *Pindaris* of old. These are the religious heads who are supposed to lead the people on the path of morality and righteousness. All their property in kinds of lands, buildings, jewels and cash money may approximately come to an amount

which, when equally distributed in a country like England, can make everyone of the citizens a millionaire. This illimitable amount is supposed to be intended for the propagation of religion, which in turn has to safeguard the position of the Almighty...Millions of our people live upon one *coarse* meal per day. Thousands are dying of starvation. Many hundreds are almost half-naked. Thousands of our children die for want of sufficient food and clothing. But the *Sankaracharis* and *Madathipathis* are rolling upon luxury and are wasting wealth on their overfed retinue. In addition to their huge property, they march from town to town, pitch their tents and exact large sums of charity from the people (Geetha and Rajadurai: 285 & 286).'

The public intellectuals of SRM believed in science, rationality and thus they were against all kinds of exploitative and obscurantist customs. Their main problem with Hinduism was due to its association with such customs. 'It is the irony of Mother India that whereas other religions spend *their* money in establishing hospitals and schools for the use of the people belonging to *our* religion, Hinduism enjoins *its* followers to waste crores on smoke, in memory of the 'heroic' deed of one of its Trinities (Geetha and Rajadurai: 288 &).' The 'tyranny of Customs' victimized all. But it was women who were sufferers more than men. 'Custom, age-long custom tyrannizes over woman more than over man. Woman has seldom the advantage of education and culture in India and feels fudgy when a new idea is introduced which may be quite reasonable and

acceptable. In the matter of dress and toilette she is more radical than the most liberal of males. Stuffed with old-world ideas of duty, obedience and submission she is repulsed by anything original or which smacks of the modern. Hindu woman do not sit with their husbands at dinner. They think it a sin to mention their Opposing *Varnadharma* husbands' names and feel it indecent to hold converse with them in the company of others. The idea of husband worship is centuries old. Every ceremonial occasion at home, in the temple or elsewhere needs the presence of the thread-wearing priest who is relentless in the collection of his tax. (Geetha and Rajadurai: 288-89).'

Thus, it becomes clear that the institutions of caste, exploitation, Brahminical rituals, subordination of women are interlinked. For example, the death ritual *sraddha* continues even today. On this occasion, a large number of Brahmins are to be fed along with performing other rituals which are very expensive. This *sraddha* burned people who incur debts and become poor. 'The enormity of the *sraddha* is thus a heavy drain on the purse, slender or long, of every Hindu from his cradle to his cremation. The Brahmin is shrewd enough and he feeds Brahmins (does not give raw or unboiled rice). The stupid non-Brahmin gives rice and every other food and curry stuff not merely to the officiating priest but to his family sufficient for a day or for weeks according to the means at the disposal of the giver...The selfish practices inculcated in the puranas are being repeated in all vernacular readers lest they cease

to be acted upon by coming generations. If Brahmins edit such readers, they seldom fail to describe with approval the customs and practices conducive to the interest of their class. Even readers published by the British firms in India contain arrant nonsense of the kind which is likely to perpetuate the slave mentality of the masses (Geetha and Rajadurai: 289 & 290).'

Further, 'Revolt' discussed practice of untouchability. In the words of Periyar: 'Is it not shameful on the part of such a country to aspire for Swaraj, Dominion Status or complete Independence? Politicians may say, that untouchability will go if we get Swaraj. To them I say not merely Swaraj but Dharma Raj, Rama Raj, Harichandra Raj and the Raj of the very Gods – these were responsible for originating and organising this blot on humanity. If these governments come to life once again, I fear the position of this class would become unredeemable. I appeal to the reformers both social and political to carry on the mission of removing the sin of untouchability and clean our society of the dirt that has accumulated for centuries (Geetha and Rajadurai: 119-120).'

After highlighting the issue of untouchability, the weekly attributed this "slavery" to Hinduism. 'The position of depressed classes in Hindu society is nothing but a sugar-coated slavery. Hinduism boasts of its antiquity or its subtle philosophy but the curse of untouchability is enough to hasten its well-deserved ruin (Geetha and Rajadurai: 222). That is why the religion of Hinduism had grown "sterile" for

the weekly 'Revolt'. 'We have a splendid spiritual heritage; but it has grown stale and profitless through the lack of the one thing which alone can keep any tradition fresh and profitable; and that is the spirit of real affection and consideration for others. The most potent survivals from our immemorial past are now what – crystallized cruelties and selfishness; infant marriage, the heartless restrictions which we place on widows, our treatment of women, generally the whole system of untouchability, what are these but matters in which the dead weight of custom has crushed out of us the ordinary decent feelings which should sweeten and harmonize the life of human beings? And what is caste itself but a system of organized selfishness.... These and many similar things are our heritage today; and it is under the weight of this heritage that we are groaning.' (Geetha and Rajadurai: 292).'

For non-Brahmin intellectuals, the Hindu law is nothing but *Manu* law. "The present Hindu Law, our readers are aware, is for the most part, based upon *Smritis* like the code of *Manu*. The laws which were enacted for a society living many thousands of years ago, cannot hold good for a society living in the twentieth century. When reformers explain to the people the simple fact that the administration of an old law which is quite incompatible with modern conditions is solely responsible for the evils in society, there is the cry of "religion in danger." (Geetha and Rajadurai: 293).'

Inequality could be perpetuated on many grounds like caste and class but for non-Brahmin

intellectuals, the caste is much worse as there is no chance for mobility. In 'Revolt', a piece presented an interesting debate between a supporter of Varnashrama and Self- Respector. While the former defends caste by saying that in all societies there would be caste system, though it was known by different name for example the Lords of England were nothing but upper caste Brahmins. In opposition to this, Self-Respector said that caste and class were not the same because there was no possibility of mobility in caste. In the word of the Self Respector, 'Class at its worst is a barrier which the individual may surmount, but caste is a prison from which he cannot hope to escape while life lasts. The child of a man born in a caste, the members of which are condemned to act as the scavengers of the community can look forward to nothing better – a scavenger he was born and a scavenger he must live all the days of his life' (Geetha and Rajadurai: 399-400).'

*The author is a PhD student of Centre for Historical Studies, JNU.

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